



PHILADELPHIA

Descriptions of Eighteenth-Century PHILADELPHIA before the Revolution

from a Swiss nobleman in 1704, an English indentured servant in 1729, an almanac publisher in 1729, a Philadelphia poet in the 1730s, a Maryland physician in 1744, a Swedish botanist in 1750, a German immigrant in 1750, Benjamin Franklin in 1757, and an English clergyman in 1759.

◆ “liberty which all strangers enjoy in commerce, belief & settlement.” 1704.

Franz Louis Michel, Letter to Mr. John Rudolf Ochs, May 20th 30, 1704, excerpts.¹

Michel was a Swiss nobleman who travelled twice to America to plan a settlement for Protestants fleeing persecution in Europe (he was later involved in the founding of New Bern, North Carolina, in 1710). On his second trip he visited Philadelphia.

Philadelphia is a city twenty-two years old, whose growth and fame is to be preferred to most English-American cities. I was astonished to see the difference, compared with other cities of this country, with regard to her size, splendid edifices, daily construction of new houses and ships, the regularity of the streets, the abundance of provisions, at a much cheaper price than in the neighboring cities. But the strongest reason why there is such an influx of people from other provinces is partly due to the liberty

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¹ William J. Hinke, ed., trans., “Letters Regarding the Second Journey of Michel to America, February 14, 1703 to January 16, 1704, and His Stay in America till 1708,” *The Virginia Magazine of History and Biography*, 24:1 (January 1916), p. 294.

which all strangers enjoy in commerce, belief and settlement, as each one understands it, and also because the money has 50 per cent more value.

Six miles from there lies a large village, a mile long, named Germantown, where almost all the inhabitants are Germans. A Frankfort company bought 30,000 acres of land with this object [goal], that when they and their people should be compelled through war, religion or other accidents to leave their homes and country, they might there find a certain and secure dwelling place.

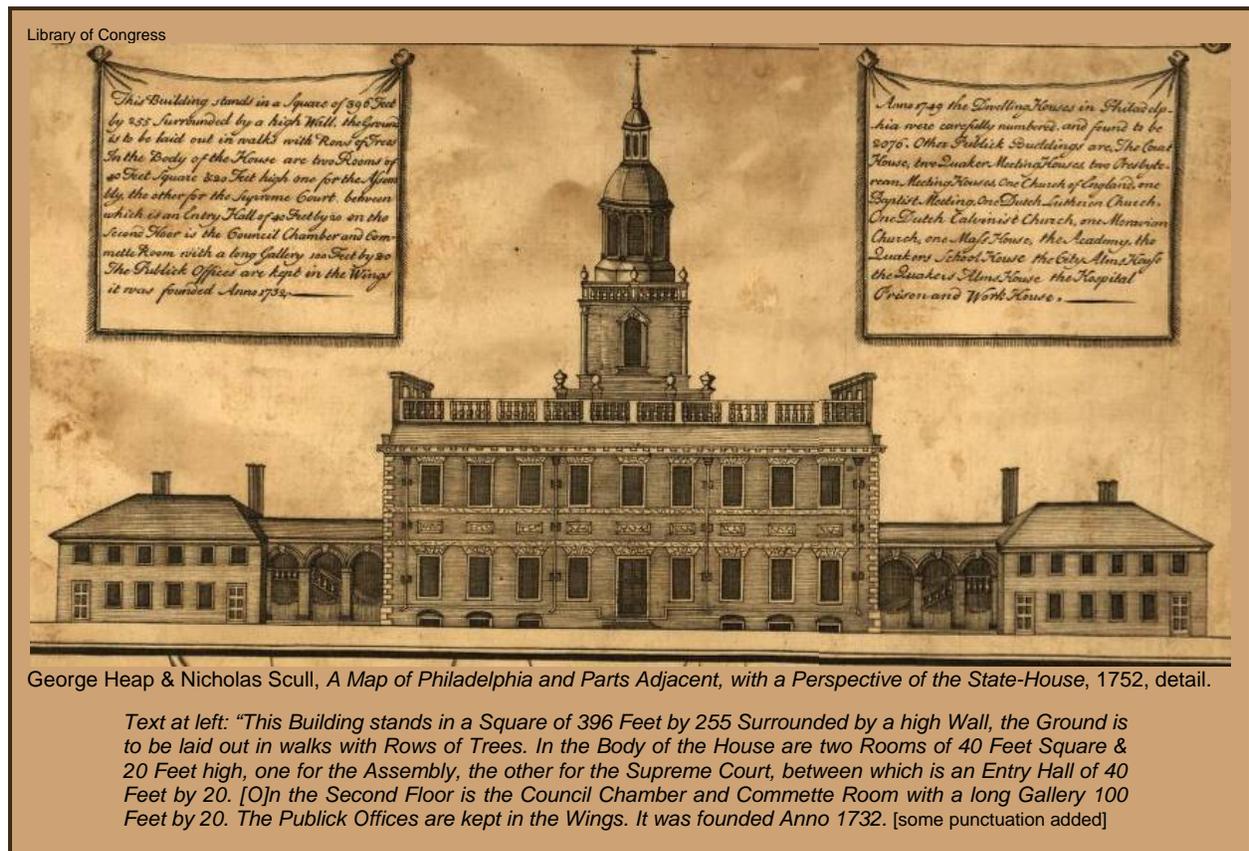
◆ “Shops and Houses as handsome as those at *Newcastle upon Tyne.*” 1729.

William Moraley, *The Infortunate: or, the Voyage and Adventures of William Moraley . . .*, 1743, excerpts.²

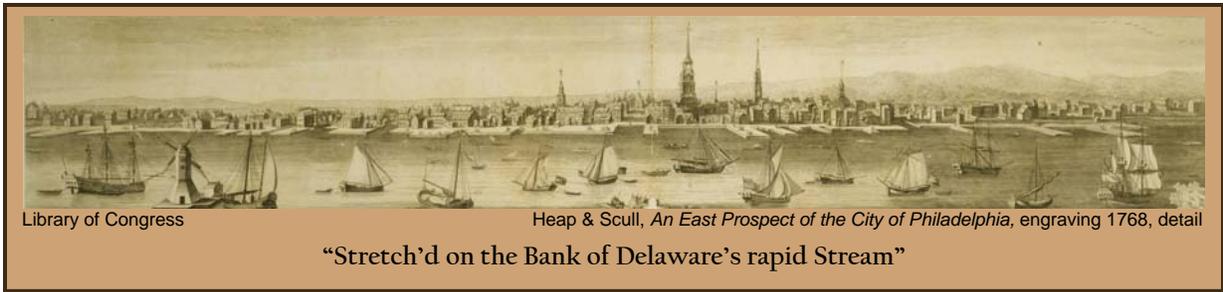
Moraley was an English indentured servant who spent four years in the middle colonies before returning to England.

There are many Houses of Entertainment, at convention distance from the Town, where the Inhabitants resort, in the cool Evenings, after the Fatigues of Business, where they regale themselves with the Product of this fertile Soil. This City is as large as Bristol, in *England*, but not so populous; and contains about 25,000 People, who have Shops and Houses as handsome as those at *Newcastle upon Tyne.* . .

At the Upper-End of *Second Street* is a State House for the Meeting of the Governor and Assembly, but not quite finished when I was there, which when done would be the finest Edifice in all *America*. The Market-place has a handsome House in it where the Assembly sat, till the other was finished; this Fronts the River. In the Shambles of this Market are sold all Kinds of Butchers Meat, as well cut and drest as at *London*: The Market Days are *Wednesdays* and *Saturdays*; but they have a Custom of retailing their Meat on *Sundays*, which is observed all over *America* in the Summer Time, because of the Heat of the Weather. Hens, Chickens and Wild Fowl are vended [sold] with Poultry of all Kinds, and Fruits and Herbs. . . .



² Susan E. Klepp & Billy G. Smith, eds. *The Infortunate: The Voyage and Adventures of William Moraley, An Indentured Servant* (Pennsylvania State University Press, 1992, 2d. ed., 2005), pp. 28-30, 32-35. Reproduced courtesy of Pennsylvania State University Press.



◆ “the *Athens* of Mankind.” 1729.

Titan Leeds, “A Memorial to William Penn,” *The Genuine Leeds Almanac for the Year of Christian Account 1730*, publ. 1729, excerpts.

Titan Leeds was a Philadelphia almanac publisher and rival of Benjamin Franklin and his *Poor Richard's Almanac*.

Stretch'd on the Bank of *Delaware's* rapid Stream
 Stands *Philadelphia*, not unknown to Fame:
 Here the tall Vessels safe at Anchor ride,
 And *Europe's* Wealth flows in with every Tide:
 Thro' each wide Ope the distant Prospect's clear;
 The well-built Streets are regularly fair:

Thy Seers how cautious! And how gravely wise!
 They hopeful Youth in Emulation rise:
 Who (if the wishing Muse inspir'd does sing)
 Shall Liberal Arts to such Perfection bring,
Europe shall mourn her ancient Fame declin'd,
 And *Philadelphia* be the *Athens* of Mankind.

...

◆ “invite Your tender Feet to Travel with Delight.” 1730s.

Joseph Breintnall, “A Plain Description of One Single Street in this City,” ca. 1730s, excerpts.³

A close friend of Benjamin Franklin and an original member of the Junto club, Breintnall was a merchant and poet.

A Plain Description of One Single Street in this City

(EXCERPTS)

At *Delaware's* broad Stream, the View begin,
 Where jutting Wharfs, Food-freighted Boats take in.
 Then with th' advancing Sun, direct your Eye;
 Wide opes the Street, with firm Brick Buildings high:
 Step, gently rising, o'er the Pebbly Way,
 And see the Shops their tempting Wares display;
 (Chief on the Right, screen'd from rude Winds and blest,
 In Frost with Sunshine) Here, if Ails molest,
 Plain surfac'd Flags, and smooth laid Bricks invite
 Your tender Feet to Travel with Delight.

...
 'Twixt, and beyond all those, near twice as far
 As from a Sling a Stone might pass in Air,
 The forging Shops of sooty Smiths are set,
 And Wheelwrights Frames—with vacant Lots to let:
 A Neighbourhood of Smoke, and piercing Dins,
 From Trades, from Prison-Grates and Publick Inns.
 But ev'n among this Noise, and Dirt, are plac'd
 Some Buildings Fair, with peaceful Tenants grac'd,

Distant, more West, with unbuilt Grounds between,
 The Furnace-House and Woods close up the Scene.
 On th' other Side (left in my Verse disjoin'd,
 But all one Picture in the Poet's Mind)
 A comely Row of Tenements unite,
 And set their various Goods and Works to Light;
 Salesmen and Trades of decent Sorts are mixt,
 (A lively place) some Tavern Signs betwixt:
 Along their Doors, the clean hard Paving trends,
 'Till at a plashy crossing Street it ends,
 And thence, a short Arm's Throw, renew'd tends.
 Mechanicks, here, in Iron, Brass, Wood and Horn,
 Their narrow Shutters, with their Wares adorn.
 'Mongst those, a few tall Structures proudly rise;
 Th' adjacent Huts look lessen'd at their Size.
 Beyond, the Street is thinly wall'd, but fair,
 With Gardens pale'd, and Orchards here and there
 On either Side, those beauteous Prospects lie;
 And some enclos'd with Hedges please the Eye.

³ David S. Shields, ed., *American Poetry: The Seventeenth and Eighteenth Centuries* (The Library of America, 2007), pp. 353-354. Permission pending.

◆ “They apply themselves strenuously to business.” 1744.

Dr. Alexander Hamilton, *Itinerarium*, 1744, excerpts.⁴

A Maryland physician, Dr. Alexander Hamilton (not the Founding Father) took a four-month journey from Maryland to Boston and back in 1744, keeping a diary (itinerarium) that displayed his caustic wit as well as his impressions of the places he visited. His impressions of Philadelphia changed from his first to his second visit.

June 4, 1744. At my entering the city I observed the regularity of the streets, but at the same time the majority of the houses mean and low, and much decayed; the streets in general not paved, very dirty and obstructed with rubbish and lumber, but their frequent building excuses that. The State-house, Assembly house, the great church in Second street, and Whitefield's Church, are good buildings. . . .

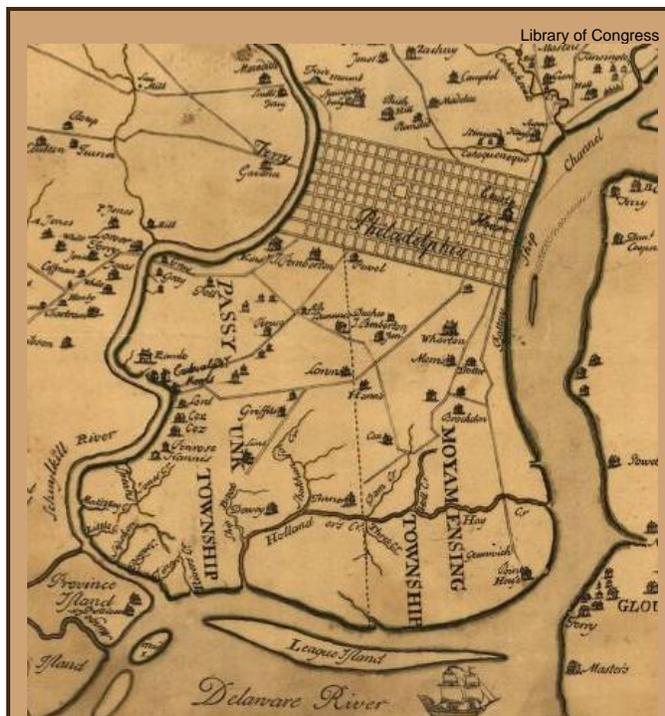
June 8, 1744. I dined at a tavern with a very mixed company of different nations and religions. There were Scots, English, Dutch, Germans, and Irish; there were Roman Catholics, Churchmen, Presbyterians, Quakers, Newlightmen, Methodists, Seventhdaymen, Moravians, Anabaptists, and one Jew. The whole company consisted of twenty-five, planted round an oblong table, in a great hall well stocked with flies. . . .

June 9, 1744. . . . The heat in this city is excessive, the sun's rays being reflected with such power from the brick houses, and from the street pavement, which is brick. The people commonly use awnings of painted cloth or duck over their shop doors and windows, and at sunset throw bucketsful of water upon the pavement, which gives a sensible cool. They are stocked with plenty of excellent water in this city, there being a pump at almost every fifty paces' distance.

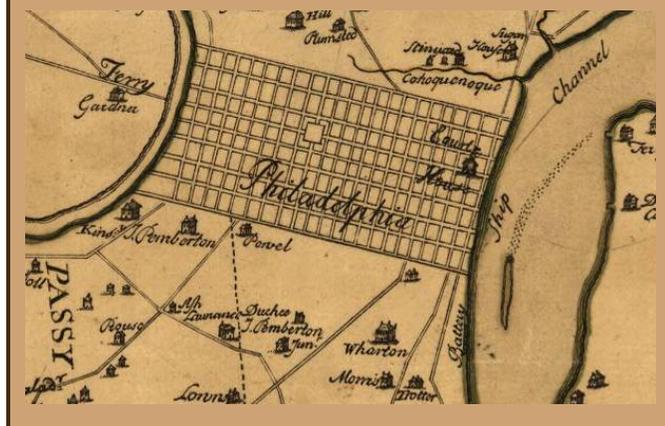
There are a great number of balconies to their houses, where sometimes the men sit in a cool habit and smoke.

The market in this city is perhaps the largest in North America. It is kept twice a week, upon Wednesdays and Saturdays. The street where it stands, called Market Street, is large and spacious, composed of the best houses in the city. . . .

The Quakers are the richest and the people of greatest interest in this government; of them their House of Assembly is chiefly composed. They have the character of an obstinate stiff-necked generation, and a perpetual plague to their Governours. The present Governour, Mr. Thomas, has fallen upon a way to manage them better than any of his predecessors did, and at the same time keep pretty much in their good



Heap & Scull, A Map of Philadelphia and Parts Adjacent, with a Perspective of the State-House, 1752, details



⁴ Full text online in American Notes: Traveling in America, 1750-1920, in American Memory, Library of Congress, at hdl.loc.gov/loc/gdc/hbhn.02374.

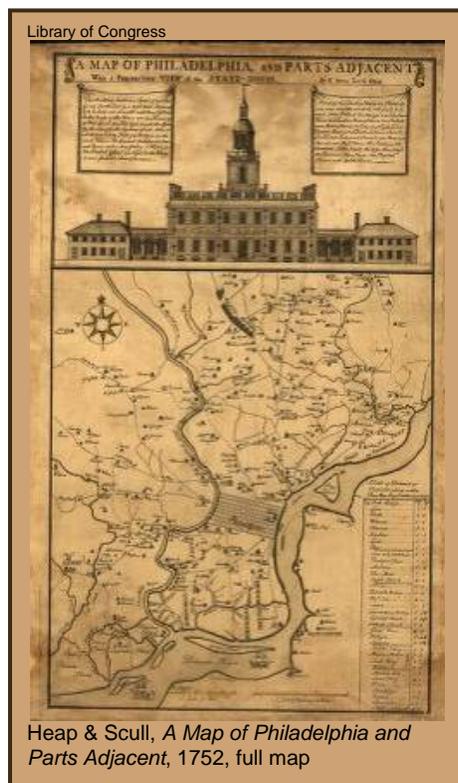
graces, and share some of their favours. However, the standing or falling of the Quakers in the House of Assembly depends upon their making sure the interest of the [German] Palatines in this Province [colony], who of late have turned so numerous that they can sway the votes which way they please.

Here is no public magazine of arms [weapons warehouse], nor any method of defense either for city or Province in case of the invasion of an enemy. This is owing to the obstinacy of the Quakers in maintaining their principle of non-resistance. It were pity but they were put to a sharp trial to see whether they would act as they profess.

I never was in a place so populous where the gout for public gay diversions prevailed so little. There is no such thing as assemblies of the gentry among them, either for dancing or music; these they have had an utter aversion to ever since Whitefield preached among them.⁵ Their chief employ, indeed, is traffic [trade] and mercantile business, which turns their thoughts from these levities. Some Virginia gentlemen that came here with the Commissioners of the Indian treaty were desirous of having a ball, but could find none of the female sex in a humour for it. Strange influence of religious enthusiasm upon human nature to excite an aversion at these innocent amusements for the most part so agreeable and entertaining to the young and gay, and indeed, in the opinion of moderate people, so conducive to the improvement of politeness, good manners, and humanity. . . .

June 12, 1744. There is polite conversation here among the better sort, among whom there is no scarcity of men of learning and good sense. The ladies, for the most part, keep at home and seldom appear in the streets, never in public assemblies, except at the churches or meetings; therefore I cannot with certainty enlarge upon their charms, having had little or no opportunity to see them either congregated or separate, but to be sure the Philadelphia dames are as handsome as their neighbours.

[On his return trip to Maryland, Hamilton again travelled through Philadelphia.]

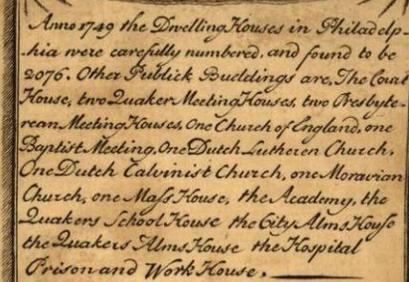


Heap & Scull, *A Map of Philadelphia and Parts Adjacent*, 1752, full map

Sept. 19, 1744. At my seeing of the city of Philadelphia, I conceived a quite different notion of both city and inhabitants from that which I had before from the account or description of others. I could not apprehend this city to be so very elegant or pretty as it is commonly represented. In its present situation it is much like one of our country market towns in England. When you are in it, the majority of the buildings appear low and mean, the streets unpaved, and therefore full of rubbish and mire. It makes but an indifferent appearance at a distance, there being no turrets or steeples to set it off to advantage, but I believe that in a few years hence it will be a great and flourishing place, and the chief city in North America.

The people are much more polite, generally speaking, than I apprehended them to be from the common account of travellers. They have that accomplishment, peculiar to all our American Colonies; viz., [namely] subtlety and craft in their dealings. They apply themselves strenuously to business, having little or no turn towards gaiety (and I know not indeed how they should, since there are few people here of independent fortunes or of high luxurious taste). Drinking here is not at all in vogue, and in the place there is pretty good company and conversation to be had. It is a degree politer than New York, tho' in its fabric not so urbane, but Boston excels both for politeness and urbanity, tho' only a town.

⁵ Rev. George Whitefield, the English preacher whose open-air revival sermons were the most influential during the Great Awakening of the 1740s.



Anno 1749 the Dwelling Houses in Philadelphia were carefully numbered, and found to be 2076. Other Publick Buildings are, The Court House, two Quaker Meeting Houses, two Presbyterian Meeting Houses, One Church of England, one Baptist Meeting, One Dutch Lutheran Church, One Dutch Calvinist Church, one Moravian Church, one Mass House, the Academy, the Quakers School House, the City Alms House, the Quakers Alms House, the Hospital, Prison and Work House.

Scully & Heap, *A Map of Philadelphia*, 1752, detail.

Anno 1749 the Dwelling Houses in Philadelphia were carefully numbered [counted], and found to be 2076. Other Publick Buildings are, The Court House, two Quaker Meeting Houses, two Presbyterian Meeting Houses, One Church of England, one Baptist meeting, one Dutch Lutheran Church, One Dutch Calvinist Church, one Moravian Church, one Mass House [Roman Catholic], the Academy, the Quakers School House, the City Alms House [for the poor] the Quakers Alms House the Hospital Prison and Work House.

◆ “a citizen here may . . . be said to live in his house like a king.” 1750.

Peter Kalm, *Travels into North America* [1750], 1770, English edition, excerpts.

A Swedish botanist, Kalm travelled through the middle and northern colonies and into French Canada, compiling an extensive survey of the region's plants, animals, peoples, and cultures, always interwoven with his personal impressions.

Freedom. Everyone who acknowledges God to be the Creator, preserver and ruler of all things, and teaches or undertakes nothing against the state or against the common peace, is at liberty to settle, stay and carry on his trade here, be his religious principles ever so strange. No one is here molested [criticized] because of misleading principles of doctrine which he may follow, if he does not exceed the above-mentioned bounds. And he is so well secured by the laws, both as to person and property, and enjoys such liberties that a citizen here may, in a manner, be said to live in his house like a king. It would be difficult to find anyone who could wish for and obtain greater freedom.

Rapidity of Urban Growth. On careful consideration of what I have already said it will be easy to conceive why this city should rise so suddenly from nothing into such grandeur and perfection without any powerful monarch contributing to

it, either by punishing the wicked or by giving great supplies of money. And yet its fine appearance, good regulations, agreeable location, natural advantages, trade, riches and power are by no means inferior to those of any, even of the most ancient, towns in Europe. It has not been necessary to force people to come and settle here. On the contrary, foreigners of different languages have left their county, houses. Property and relations and ventured over wide and stormy seas in order to come hither. Other countries, which have been peopled for a long space of time, complain of the small number of their inhabitants. But Pennsylvania, which was not better than a wilderness in the year 1681, and contained hardly fifteen hundred people, now vies with several kingdoms in Europe in the number of inhabitants. It has received hosts of people which other countries, to their infinite loss, have either neglected, belittled or expelled.

◆ “in time it will be one of the largest cities in the world.” 1750.

Gottlieb Mittelberger, *Journey to Pennsylvania in the Year 1750, and Return to Germany in the Year 1754*, 1756, excerpts.

In 1750 the German schoolmaster Gottlieb Mittelberger travelled to America with four hundred other emigrants, arriving in the port of Philadelphia. Distressed by the fate of many who were sold into indentured servitude, he returned to Germany in 1754 and published an account to dissuade others from emigrating to America.

Said city is the capital of Pennsylvania where all the commerce is carried on. It is already very large, regularly and handsomely built, and laid out with broad streets and many cross-alleys. All the houses are built of stone or brick up to the fourth story, and roofed with shingles of cedar wood. It takes almost a day to walk around the town; about 300 new houses are built every year. It is thought that in time it will be one of the largest cities in the world. . . .

The trade of the city and country to other countries and colonies increases perceptibly from year to year. It consists in fruit, flour, corn, tobacco, honey, skins, various kinds of costly furs, flax, and

particularly a great deal of flax-seed or linseed, also fine cut lumber, horses, and all kinds of tame and wild animals. In return the incoming vessels bring all sorts of goods, such as Spanish, Portuguese and German wines, the best of which cost a rix-dollar, the most inferior a florin per quart. Also spices, sugar, tea, coffee, rice, rum, which is a brandy distilled from sugar, molasses, fine china vessels, Dutch and English clothes, leather, linen, stuffs, silks, damask, velvet, etc. There is actually everything to be had in Pennsylvania that may be obtained in Europe, because so many merchantmen land here every year. Ships are coming from Holland, Old and New England, Scotland, Ireland, Spain, Portugal, Maryland, New York, Carolina, and from the West and East Indies. . . .

. . . In this town there are already eight churches, three English, three German, one Swedish, and one Quaker church. In the last named one can often hear and see a woman preach in English, but no singing is heard in this class [sect], because they don't believe in singing. After the sermon is over, he who has objections against the sermon steps forth and explains his opinion; and then one can often hear two persons disputing before the whole assemblage, which lasts sometimes longer than the sermon.

A *gymnasium* [college] has also been established in the city, where several languages are taught; for in this city and country people from every part of the world can be seen, especially Europeans, of whom one could count more than a hundred thousand.

◆ “rais'd a general desire to have all the streets paved.” 1757.

Benjamin Franklin, *Autobiography*, written in 1771/84/88-90, first published 1791, excerpt.

Among Franklin's initiatives to improve the city of Philadelphia — a fire-fighting company, a hospital for the poor, and the College of Philadelphia among them — was his campaign to clean and later pave the city's streets.

Our city, tho' laid out with a beautiful regularity, the streets large, straight, and crossing each other at right angles, had the disgrace of suffering those streets to remain long unpav'd, and in wet weather the wheels of heavy carriages plough'd them into a quagmire, so that it was difficult to cross them; and in dry weather the dust was offensive. I had liv'd near what was call'd the Jersey Market and saw with pain the inhabitants wading in mud while purchasing their provisions. A strip of ground down the middle of that market was at length pav'd with brick, so that, being once in the market, they had firm footing, but were often over shoes in dirt to get there. By talking and writing on the subject, I was at length instrumental in getting the street pav'd with stone between the market and the brick'd foot-pavement that was on each side next the houses. This, for some time, gave an easy access to the market dry-shod. but, the rest of the street not being pav'd, whenever a carriage came out of the mud upon this pavement, it shook off and left its dirt upon it, and it was soon cover'd with mire, which was not remov'd, the city as yet having no scavengers.

After some inquiry I found a poor industrious man who was willing to undertake keeping the pavement clean by sweeping it twice a week, carrying off the dirt from before all the neighbours' doors, for the sum of sixpence per month to be paid by each house. I then wrote and printed a paper setting forth the advantages to the neighbourhood that might be obtain'd by this small expense — the greater ease in keeping our houses clean, so much dirt not being brought in by people's feet, the benefit to the shops by more custom, etc., etc., as buyers could more easily get at them and by not having, in windy weather, the dust blown in upon their goods, etc., etc. I sent one of these papers to each house, and in a day or two went round to see who would subscribe an agreement to pay these sixpences. It was unanimously sign'd and for a time well executed. All the inhabitants of the city were delighted with the cleanliness of the pavement that surrounded the market, it being a convenience to all, and this rais'd a general desire to have all the streets paved, and made the people more willing to submit to a tax for that purpose.

After some time I drew a bill for paving the city and brought it into the Assembly. It was just before I went to England in 1757 and did not pass till I was gone, and then with an alteration in the mode of assessment, which I thought not for the better, but with an additional provision for lighting as well as paving the streets, which was a great improvement.



J. Hulett, *A View of the House of Employment, Alms-House, Pennsylvania Hospital, and part of the city of Philadelphia*, ca. 1767, detail.

◆ “the object of everyone’s wonder and admiration.” 1759.

Rev. Andrew Burnaby, *Travels through the Middle Settlements in North-America. In the Years 1759 and 1760*, London: 1775.

An Anglican clergyman from England, Andrew Burnaby travelled throughout British America from Virginia to Massachusetts.

Philadelphia, if we consider that not eighty years ago the place where it now stands was a wild and uncultivated desert, inhabited by nothing but ravenous beasts and a savage people, must certainly be the object of everyone’s wonder and admiration. . . The streets are laid out with great regularity in parallel lines, intersected by others at right angles, and are handsomely built. On each side there is a pavement of broad stones for foot passengers; and in most of them a causeway in the middle for carriages. Upon dark nights it is well lighted, and watched by a patrol. There are many fair houses and public edifices in it. The stadt-house is a large, handsome, though heavy building. In this are held the councils, the assemblies, and supreme courts. There are apartments in it also for the accommodation of Indian chiefs or sachems; likewise two libraries; one belonging to the province; the other to a society, which was incorporated about ten years ago, and consists of sixty members.

Near this there is also a noble hospital for lunatics and other sick persons. Besides these buildings, there are spacious barracks for 17 or 1800 men; a good assembly-room belonging to the society of free-masons; and eight or ten places of religious worship; viz. [namely] two churches, three Quakers meeting-houses, two Presbyterian ditto, one Lutheran church, one Dutch Calvinist ditto, one Swedish ditto, one Romish [Catholic] chapel, one Anabaptist meeting-house, one Moravian ditto. There is also an academy or college, originally built for a tabernacle for Mr. Whitefield. At the south-end of the town, upon the river, there is a battery mounting thirty guns, but it is in a state of decay. It was designed to be a check upon privateers [pirates]. These, with a few almshouses [for the poor] and a school-house belonging to the Quakers, are the chief public buildings in Philadelphia.

The city is in a very flourishing state, and inhabited by merchants, artists, tradesmen, and persons of all occupations. There is a public market held twice a week, upon Wednesday and Saturday, almost equal to that of Leadenhall; and a tolerable one every day besides. The streets are crowded with people, and the river with vessels. . . .

Can the mind have a greater pleasure than in contemplating the rise and progress of cities and kingdoms? Than in perceiving a rich and opulent state arising out of a small settlement or colony? This pleasure everyone must feel who considers Pennsylvania.

|| *Can the mind have a greater pleasure than in contemplating
the rise and progress of cities and kingdoms?* ||